Mark had never quite lost the memory of that morning in the fog, his brief meeting with Mabel, and the untimely parting by the hedge. Subsequent events had naturally done something to efface the impression which her charm and grace had made upon him then; but even yet he saw her face at times as clearly as ever, and suffered once more the dull pain he had felt when he first knew that she had gone from him without leaving him the faintest hope of being ever privileged to know her more intimately or even see her again.

Sometimes, when he dreamed most wildly of the brilliant future that was to come to him, he saw himself, as the author of several famous and successful works (amongst which "Illusion" was entirely obscured), meeting her once more, and marking his sense of her past ingratitude by a studied coldness. But this was a possibility that never, even in his most sanguine moments, was other than remote.

But he did not know, and let the appeal lie unanswered that was due to Mabel's suggestion—"the moral of which," as Alice's Duchess might say, "is that one should never neglect a child's letter."

CHAPTER XI

A "THORN AND FLOWER PIECE"

"ILLUSION" had not been very long published before Mark began to have uncomfortable anticipations that it might be on the way to achieve an unexpected success, and he was nearer the truth in this than he himself believed as yet. It might not become popular in the wider and coarser sense of the word, being somewhat over the heads of the large class who read fiction for the "story"; it might never find its way to railway bookstalls (though even this, as will appear, befell it in time), but it was already gaining recognition as a book that people of any culture should, for their own sakes, at least assume to have read and appreciated.

Mark was hailed by many judges of such things as a new and powerful thinker, who had chosen to veil his theories under the garb of romance, and if the theory was dissented from in some quarters, the power and charm of the book were universally admitted. At dinner parties, and in all

circles where literature is discussed at all, "Illusion" was becoming a standard topic; friendships were cemented and intimacies dissolved over it; it became a kind of "shibboleth."

At first Mark had little opportunity of realising this to the full extent, for he went out seldom, if at all. There had been a time in his life—before he had left Cambridge, that is—when he had mixed more in society; his undergraduate friends had been proud to present to their family circle a man with his reputation for general brilliancy, and so his engagements in the vacations had been frequent. But this did not last; from a feeling that his own domestic surroundings would scarcely bear out a vaguely magnificent way he had of alluding to his "place" and his "people"—a way which was not so much deliberate imposition as a habit caught from associates richer and higher up in the social scale—from this feeling, he never offered to return any of these hospitalities, and, though this was not rigorously expected of him, it did serve to prevent any one of his numerous acquaintances from ripening into something more. When the crash came, and it was generally discovered that the reputed brilliant man of his year was a very ordinary failure, Mark found himself speedily forgotten, and in the first soreness of disappointment was not sorry to remain in obscurity for a season.

But now a reaction in his favour was setting in; his publishers were already talking of a second edition of "Illusion," and he received, under his name of "Cyril Ernstone," countless letters of congratulation and kindly criticism, all so pleasantly and cordially worded that each successive note made him angrier, the only one that consoled him at all being a communication in a female hand which abused the book and its writer in the most unmeasured terms. For his correspondent's estimate of the work was the one which he had a secret wish to see more prevalent (so long, of course, as it did not interfere with the success of his scheme), and he could almost have written to thank her—had she not, by some unfortunate oversight, forgotten to append her name and address.

The next stage in the career of the book was a discovery on some one's part that the name of its author was an

assumed one, and although there are many who would as little think of looking for the name of the man who wrote the play they see or the book they read as they would for that of the locomotive behind which they travel, there are still circles for whom the first two matters at least possess an interest.

And so several set out to run the actual author to earth, well assured that, as is fabled of the fox, he himself would enjoy the sport as much as his pursuers; and it is the fact that Mark might have given them a much longer run had he been anxious to do so, but, though he regretted it afterwards, the fruits of popularity were too desirable to be forgone.

There were some false cries at first. A "London Correspondent" knew for a fact that the book was written by an old lady at a lunatic asylum in her lucid intervals; while a ladies' journal had heard that the author was a common carpenter and entirely self-educated; and there were other similar discoveries. But before they had time to circulate widely it became somehow common knowledge that the author was a young schoolmaster, and that his real name was Mark Ashburn.

And Mark at once began to reap the benefit. His old friends sought him out once more; men who had passed him in the streets with a careless nod that was almost as bad as a cut direct, or without even the smallest acknowledgment that a time had been when they were inseparables, now found time to stop him and ask if the rumours of his debut in literature were really true.

By-and-by cards began to line his mantelpiece, as in the old days; he went out once more, and met everywhere the kindness and courtesy that the world of London, whatever may be said against it, is never chary of showing towards the most insignificant person who has once had the good fortune to arouse its interest.

Mark liked it all at first, but as he saw the book growing more and more in favour, and the honours paid to himself increasing, he began to be uneasy at his own success.

He would not have objected to the book's securing a moderate degree of attention, so as to prepare the public mind for the blaze of intellect he had in reserve for it—that he had expected, or at least hoped for—but the mischief of this ridiculous enthusiasm which everyone he met

seemed to be affecting over this book of Holroyd's, was that it made an anticlimax only too possible when his own should see the light.

Mark heard compliments and thanks with much the annoyance a practised *raconteur* must feel with the feeble listener who laughs heartily, while the point of the story he is being told is still in perspective.

Sooner or later, while talking to the most charming persons, just when he was feeling himself conversationally at his very best, he would see the symptoms he dreaded warning him that the one fatal topic was about to be introduced, which seemed to have the effect of paralysing his brain. He would struggle hard against it, making frantic efforts to turn the subject, and doubling with infinite dexterity; but generally his interlocutor was not to be put off, "running cunning," as it were, like a greyhound dead to sporting instincts, and fixing him at once with a "Now, Mr. Ashburn, you really must allow me to express to you some of the pleasure and instruction I have received from your book," and so on; and then Mark found himself forced to listen with ghastly smiles of sham gratification to the praises of his rival, as he now felt Holroyd was after all becoming, and had to discuss with the air of a creator this book which he had never cared to understand, and soon became cordially to detest.

But he braced himself to go through with it and play out his part. It would not be for long; soon he would have his own book to be complimented upon and to explain. Meanwhile he worked hard at "Illusion," until he came to have a considerable surface acquaintance with it; he knew the names of all the more important characters in it now, and hardly ever mixed them up; he worked out most of the allusions, and made a careful analysis of the plot and pedigrees of some of the families. It was much harder work than reading law, and quite as distasteful; but then it had to be done if he meant to preserve appearances at all.

He had met an old acquaintance of his, a certain young Herbert Featherstone, who had on any previous chance encounter seemed affected by a kind of trance, during which his eyes lost all power of vision, but was now completely recovered, so much so indeed as to greet Mark with a quite unexpected warmth.

Was it true that he had written this new book? What

was its name—"Delusions" or something? Fellows were saying he had; hadn't read it himself; his mother and sister had; said it was a devilish good book, too. Where was he hanging out now, and what was he doing on the 10th? Could he come to a little dance his people had that night? Very well, then, he should have a card.

Mark was slightly inclined to let the other understand that he knew the worth of this resuscitated friendliness, but he refrained. He knew of the Featherstones as wealthy people, with the reputation of giving the pleasantest entertainments in London. He had his way to make in the world, and could not afford, he thought, to neglect these opportunities. So he went to the dance and, as he happened to dance well, enjoyed himself, in spite of the fact that two of his partners had read "Illusion," and knew him as the author of it. They were both pretty and charming girls, but Mark did not enjoy either of those particular valses. In the course of the evening he had a brief conversation with his hostess, and was fortunate enough to produce a favourable impression. Mrs. Featherstone was literary herself, as a reputedly strong-minded lady would necessarily be. She liked to have a few rising young literary men in her train, with whom she might discuss subjects loftier than ordinary society cares to grasp; but she was careful at the same time that her daughter should not share too frequently in these intellectual privileges, for Gilda Featherstone was very handsome, and literary men are as impressionable as other people.

Mark called one Saturday afternoon at the Featherstones' house in Grosvenor Place, as he had been expressly invited to do on the occasion of the dance, and found Mrs. Featherstone at home. It was not her regular day, and she received him alone, though Mark heard voices and laughter now and then from behind the hangings which concealed the end room of the long suite.

"And now let us talk about your delightful 'Illusion, Mr. Ernstone," she said graciously. "Do you know, I felt when I read your book that some of my innermost thoughts, my highest aspirations, had been put into words—and *such* words—for me! It was soul speaking to soul, and you get that in so few novels, you know! What a rapture literary creation is! Don't you feel that? I am sure, even in my own poor little way—you must know

that *I* have scribbled once upon a time—even in my own experience, I know what a state of excitement I got into over my own stories. One's characters get to be actual living companions to one; they act by themselves, and all one has to do is just to sit by and look on, and describe."

This seemed to Mark to prove a vividness of imagination on Mrs. Featherstone's part to which her literary productions had not, so far as he knew, done full credit. But he was equal to the occasion.

"Your characters, Mrs. Featherstone, are companions to many more than their creator. I must confess that I, for one, fell hopelessly in love with your Gwendoline Vane, in 'Mammon and Moonshine.'"

Mark had once read a slashing review of a flabby little novel with a wooden heroine of that name, and turned it to good account now, after his fashion.

"Now, how nice of you to say that," she said, highly pleased. "I am very fond of Gwendoline myself—my ideal, you know. I won't quote that about 'praise from Sir Hubert,' because it's so very trite, but I feel it. But do you *really* like Gwendoline better than my Magdalen Harwood, in 'Strawberries and Cream'?"

Here Mark got into deep water once more; but he was no mean conversational swimmer, and reached dry land without any unseemly floundering.

"It has been suggested to me, do you know," she said, when her own works had been at last disposed of, "that your 'Illusion' would make such an admirable play; the central motive is really so dramatic. Of course one would have to leave the philosophy out, and all the beautiful reflections, but the story would be left. Have you ever thought of dramatising it yourself, Mr. Ashburn?"

Mark had not. Ah, well," she said, "if ever I have time again to give to literature, I shall ask your permission to let me see what *I* can do with it. I have written some little charades for drawing-room theatricals, you know, so I am not *quite* without experience."

Mark, wondering inwardly how Holroyd would relish this proposal if he were alive, said that he was sure the story would gain by her treatment; and presently she proposed that they should go to the further room and see "how the young people were getting on," which Mark received with an immense relief, and followed her

through the *portière* to the inner room, in which, as will be seen, an unexpected stroke of good fortune was to befall him.

They found the young people, with a married sister of Mrs. Featherstone, sitting round a small table on which was a heap of *cartes-de-visite*, as they used to be called for no very obvious reason.

Gilda Featherstone, a lively brunette, with the manner of a young lady accustomed to her own way, looked up from the table to welcome Mark.

"Mr. Ashburn," said Miss Featherstone, "will you come and help me to put these photos back? There are lots of Gertie's Cambridge friends here, and you can tell me who those I don't know are."

So Mark followed her to a side table, and then came the stroke of good fortune which has been spoken of; for, as he was replacing the likenesses in the albums in the order they were given to him, he was given one at the sight of which he could not avoid a slight start. It was a *vignette*, very delicately and artistically executed, of a girl's head, and as he looked, hardly daring to believe in such a coincidence, he was almost certain that the pure brow, with the tendrils of soft hair curling above it, the deep clear eyes, and the mouth which for all its sweetness had the possibility of disdain in its curves, were those of no other than the girl he had met months ago, and had almost resigned himself never to meet again.

His voice trembled a little with excitement as he said, "May I ask the name of this lady?"

"That is Mabel Langton. I think she's perfectly lovely; don't you? She was to have been at our dance the other night, and then you could have seen her. But she couldn't come at the last moment."

"I think I have met Miss Langton," said Mark, beginning to see now all that he had gained by learning this simple surname. "Hasn't she a little sister called Dorothy?"

"Dolly? Oh yes. Sweetly pretty child—terribly spoilt. I think she will put dear Mabel quite in the shade by the time she comes out; her features are so much more regular. Yes; I see you know *our* Mabel Langton. And now, *do* tell me, Mr. Ashburn, because of course you can read people's characters so clearly, you know, what do *you* think of Mabel, really and truly?"

Miss Featherstone was fond of getting her views on the characters of her friends revised and corrected for her by competent male opinion, but it was sometimes embarrassing to be appealed to in this way, while only a very unsophisticated person would permit himself to be entirely candid, either in praise or detraction.

"Well, really," said Mark, "you see, I have only met her once in my life."

"Oh but that must be quite enough for *you*, Mr. Ashburn! And Mabel Langton is always such a puzzle to me. I can never quite make up my mind if she is really as sweet as she seems. Sometimes I fancy I have noticed—and yet I can't be sure—I've heard people say that she is just the least bit, not exactly conceited, perhaps, but too inclined to trust her own opinion about things and snub people who won't agree with her. But she isn't, is she? I always say that is *quite* a wrong idea about her. Still, perhaps—— Oh, wouldn't you like to know Mr. Caffyn? He is very clever and amusing, you know, and has just gone on the stage, but he's not as good there as we all thought he would be. He's coming this way now." Here Caffyn strolled leisurely towards them, and the introduction was made. "Of course you have heard of Mr. Ashburn's great book, 'Illusion'?" Gilda Featherstone said, as she mentioned Mark's name.

"Heard of nothing else lately," said Caffyn. "After which I am ashamed to have to own I haven't read it, but it's the disgraceful truth."

Mark felt the danger of being betrayed by a speech like this into saying something too hideously fatuous, over the memory of which he would grow hot with shame in the night-watches, so he contented himself with an indulgent smile, perhaps in default of some impossible combination of wit and modesty, his best available resource.

Besides, the new acquaintance made him strangely uneasy; he felt warned to avoid him by one of those odd instincts which (although we scarcely ever obey them) are surely given us for our protection; he could not meet the cold light eyes which seemed to search him through and through.

"Mr. Ashburn and I were just discussing somebody's character," said Miss Featherstone, by way of ending an awkward pause.

"Poor somebody!" drawled Caffyn, with an easy impertinence which he had induced many girls, and Gilda amongst them, to tolerate, if not admire.

"You need not pity her," said Gilda, indignantly; "we were *defending* her."

"Ah!" said Caffyn, "from one another?"

"No, we were not; and if you are going to be cynical, and satirical, and all that, you can go away. Well, sit down, then, and behave yourself. What, must you go, Mr. Ashburn? Good-bye, then. Mr. Caffyn, I want you to tell me what you *really* think about——"

Mark heard no more than this; he was glad to escape, to get away from Caffyn's scrutiny. "He looked as if he knew I was a humbug!" he thought afterwards; and also to think at his leisure over this new discovery, and all it meant for him.

He knew her name now; he saw a prospect of meeting her at some time or other in the house he had just left; but perhaps he might not even have to wait for that.

This little girl, whose childish letter he had tossed aside a few days since in his blindness, who else could she be but the owner of the dog after which he had clambered up the railway slope? And he had actually been about to neglect her appeal!

Well, he would write now. Who could say what might not come of it? At all events, *she* would read his letter.

That letter gave Mark an infinite deal of trouble. After attentively reading the little story to which it referred, he sat down to write, and tore up sheet after sheet in disgust, for he had never given much study to the childish understanding, with its unexpected deeps and shallows, and found the task of writing down to it go much against the grain. But the desire of satisfying a more fastidious critic than Dolly gave him at last a kind of inspiration, and the letter he did send, with some misgiving, could hardly have been better written for the particular purpose.

He was pleasantly reassured as to this a day or two later by another little note from Dolly, asking him to come to tea at Kensington Park Gardens on any afternoon except Monday or Thursday, and adding (evidently by external suggestion) that her mother and sister would be pleased to make his acquaintance.

Mark read this with a thrill of eager joy. What he had

longed for had come to pass, then; he was to see her, speak with her, once more. At least he was indebted to "Illusion" for this result, which a few months since seemed of all things the most unlikely. This time, perhaps, she would not leave him without a word or sign, as when they last met; he might be allowed to come again; even in time to know her intimately.

And he welcomed this piece of good fortune as a happy omen for the future.

CHAPTER XII

In the Spring

Mark lost no time in obeying Dolly's summons, and it was with an exhilaration a little tempered by a nervousness to hich he was not usually subject that he leaped into the hansom that was to carry him to Kensington Park Gardens.

But as he drew nearer Notting Hill, his spirits sank again. What if this opportunity were to collapse as hopelessly as the first? Mabel would of course have forgotten him —would she let him drop indifferently as before? He felt far from hopeful as he rang the bell.

He asked for Miss Dorothy Langton, giving his name as "Mr. Ernstone," and was shown into a little room filled with the pretty contrivances which the modern young lady collects around her. He found Dolly there alone, in a very stately and self-possessed mood.

"You can bring tea up here, Champion," she said, "and some tea-cake—*you* like tea-cakes of course," she said to Mark, with something of afterthought. "Mother and Mabel are out, calling or something," she added, "so we shall be quite alone. And now sit down there in that chair and tell me everything you know about fairies."

Mark's heart sank—this was not at all what he had hoped for; but Dolly had thrown herself back in her own chair with such evident expectation, and a persuasion that she had got hold of an authority on fairy-lore, that he did not dare to expostulate—although in truth his acquaintance with the subject was decidedly limited.

"You can begin now," said Dolly calmly, as Mark stared blankly into his hat.

"Well," he said, "what do you want to know about them?"

"*All* about them," said Dolly, with the air of a little person accustomed to instant obedience; Mark's letter had not quite dispelled her doubts, and she wanted to be quite certain that such cases as that of the sugar prince were by no means common.

"Well," said Mark again, clearing his throat, "they dance round in rings, you know, and live inside flowers, and play tricks with people—that is," he added, with a sort of idea that he must not encourage superstition, "they did once— of course there are no such things now."

"Then how was it that that little girl you knew—who was not me—ate one up?"

"He was the last one," said Mark.

"But how did he get turned into sugar? Had he done anything wrong?"

"That's how it was."

"What was it—he hadn't told a story, had he?"

"It's exactly what he *had* done," said Mark, accepting this solution gratefully; "an *awful* story!"

"What was the story?" Dolly demanded at this, and Mark floundered on, beginning to consider Dolly, for all her pretty looks and ways, a decided little nuisance.

"He—he said the Queen of the Fairies squinted," he stammered in his extremity.

"Then it was she who turned him into sugar?"

"Of course it was," said Mark.

"But you said he was the last fairy left!" persisted the terrible Dolly.

"Did I?" said Mark miserably; "I mean the last but one—she was the *other*."

"Then who was there to tell the story to?" Dolly cross-examined, and Mark quailed, feeling that any more explanations would probably land him in worse difficulties.

"I don't think you know very much about it, after all," she said with severity. "I suppose you put all you knew into the story. But you're quite sure there was no fairy inside the figure *I* ate, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes," said Mark, "I—I happen to know that.'

"*That's* all right, then," said Dolly, with a little sigh of relief. "Was that the only fairy story you know?"

"Yes," Mark hastened to explain, in deadly fear lest he might be called upon for another.

" Oh," said Dolly, " then we'd better have tea "—for the door had opened.

" It's not Champion after all," she cried ; " it's Mabel. I never heard you come back, Mabel."

And Mark turned, to realise his dearest hopes, and find himself face to face once more with Mabel.

She came in, looking even lovelier, he thought, in her fresh spring toilette than in the winter furs she had worn when he had seen her last, bent down to kiss Dolly, and then glanced at him with the light of recognition coming into her grey eyes.

" This is Mr. Ernstone, Mab," said Dolly.

The pink in Mabel's cheeks deepened slightly ; the author of the book which had stirred her so unusually was the young man who had not thought it worth his while to see any more of them. Probably had he known who had written to him, he would not have been there now, and this gave a certain distance to her manner as she spoke.

" We have met before, Mr. Ernstone," she said, giving him her ungloved hand. " Very likely you have forgotten when and how, but I am sure Dolly had not, had you, Dolly ? "

But Dolly had, having been too much engrossed with her dog on the day of the breakdown to notice appearances, even of his preserver, very particularly. " *When* did I see him before, Mabel ? " she whispered.

" Oh, Dolly, ungrateful child ! Don't you remember who brought Frisk out of the train for you that day in the fog ? " But Dolly hung her head and drooped her long lashes, twining her fingers with one of those sudden attacks of awkwardness that sometimes seize the most self-possessed children. " You never thanked him then, you know," continued Mabel, " aren't you going to say a word to him now ? "

" Thank you very much for saving my dog," murmured Dolly very quickly, and without looking at him ; when Mabel seeing that she was not at her ease, suggested that she should run and fetch Frisk to return thanks in person, which Dolly accepted gladly as permission to escape.

Mark had risen, of course, at Mabel's entrance, and was standing at one corner of the curtained mantelpiece ; Mabel was at the other, absently smoothing the fringe with delicate curves of her hand and with her eyes bent on

the rug at her feet. Both were silent for a few moments. Mark had felt the coldness in her manner. "She remembers how shabbily she treated me," he thought, "and she's too proud to show it."

"You must forgive Dolly," said Mabel at last, thinking that if Mark meant to be stiff and disagreeable, there was no need at least for the interview to be made ridiculous. "Children have short memories—for faces only, I hope, not kindnesses. But if you had cared to be thanked we should have seen you before."

"Rather cool that," Mark thought. "I am only surprised," he said, "that *you* should remember it; you gave me more thanks than I deserved at the time. Still, as I had no opportunity of learning your name or where you lived—if you recollect we parted very suddenly, and you gave me no permission——"

"But I sent a line to you by the guard," she said; "I gave you our address and asked you to call and see my mother, and let Dolly thank you properly."

She was not proud and ungracious after all, then. He felt a great joy at the thought, and shame, too, for having so misjudged her.

"If I had ever received it," he said, "I hope you will believe that you would have seen me before this; but I asked for news of you from that burly old impostor of a guard, and he—he gave me no intelligible message" (Mark remembered suddenly the official's extempore effort), "and certainly nothing in writing."

Mark's words were evidently sincere, and as she heard them, the coldness and restraint died out of Mabel's face, the slight misunderstanding between them was over.

"After all, you are here, in spite of guards," she said, with a gay little laugh. "And now we have even more to be grateful to you for."

And then, simply and frankly, she told him of the pleasure "Illusion" had given her, while, at her gracious words, Mark felt almost for the first time the full meanness of his fraud, and wished, as he had certainly never wished before, that he had indeed written the book.

But this only made him shrink from the subject; he acknowledged what she said in a few formal words, and attempted to turn the conversation, more abruptly than he had done for some time on such occasions. Mabel was of

opinion, and with perfect justice, that even genius itself would scarcely to warranted in treating her approval in this summary fashion, and felt slightly inclined to resent it, even while excusing it to herself as the unintentional gaucherie of an over-modest man.

" I ought to have remembered, perhaps," she said, with a touch of pique in her voice, " that you must long ago have tired of hearing such things."

He had, indeed, but he saw that his brusqueness had annoyed her, and hastened to explain. " You must not think that is so," he said, very earnestly ; " only, there is praise one cannot trust oneself to listen to long——"

" And it really makes you uncomfortable to be talked to about ' Illusion ' ? " said Mabel.

" I will be quite frank, Miss Langton," said Mark (and he really felt that he must for his own peace of mind convince her of this) ; " *really* it does. Because, you see, I feel all the time—I hope, that is—that I can do much better work in the future."

" And we have all been admiring in the wrong place ? I see," said Mabel, with apparent innocence, but a rather dangerous gleam in her eyes.

" Oh, I know it sounds conceited," said Mark, " but the real truth is, that when I hear such kind things said about a work which—which gave me so very little trouble to produce, it makes me a little uncomfortable sometimes, because (you know how perversely things happen sometimes), because I can't help a sort of fear that my next book, to which I really am giving serious labour, may be utterly unnoticed, or—or worse ! "

There was no possibility of mistaking this for mock-modesty, and though Mabel thought such sensitiveness rather overstrained, she liked him for it notwithstanding.

" I think you need not fear that," she said ; " but you shall not be made uncomfortable any more. And you are writing another book ? May I ask you about that, or is that another indiscretion ? "

Mark was only too delighted to be able to talk about a book which he really *had* written ; it was at least a change ; and he plunged into the subject with much zest.

" It deals with things and men," he concluded, " on rather a larger scale than ' Illusion ' has done. I have tried to keep it clear of all commonplace characters."

"But then it will not be quite so life-like, will it?" suggested Mabel; "and in 'Illusion' you made even commonplace characters interesting."

"That is very well," he said, a little impatiently, "for a book which does not aim at the first rank. It is easy enough to register exactly what happens around one. Anybody who keeps a diary can do that. The highest fiction should idealise."

"I'm afraid I prefer the other fiction, then," said Mabel. "I like to sympathise with the characters, and you can't sympathise with an ideal hero and heroine. I hope you will let your heroine have one or two little weaknesses, Mr. Ernstone."

"Now you are laughing at me," said Mark, more humbly. "I must leave you to judge between the two books, and if I can only win your approval, Miss Langton, I shall prize it more than I dare to say."

"If it is at all like 'Illusion'—— Oh, I forgot," Mabel broke off suddenly. "That is forbidden ground, isn't it? And now, will you come into the drawing-room and be introduced to my mother? We shall find some tea there."

Mrs. Langton was a little sleepy after a long afternoon of card-leaving and call-paying, but she was sufficiently awake to be gracious when she had quite understood who Mark was.

"So very kind of you to write to my little daughter about such nonsense," she said. "Of course I don't mean that the story itself was anything of the kind, but little girls have such silly fancies—at least mine seem to have. *You* were just the same at Dolly's age, Mabel. . . Now *I* never recollect worrying myself about such ideas. . . . I'm sure I don't know how they get it. But I hear it is such a wonderful book you have written, Mr. Ernstone. I've not read it yet. My wretched health, you know. But really, when I think how clever you must be, I feel quite afraid to talk to you. I always consider it must require so *much* cleverness and—and perseverance—you know, to write *any* book."

"Oh, Mabel, only think," cried Dolly, now quite herself again, from one of the window-seats, "Frisk has run away again, and been out ever since yesterday morning. I forgot that just now. So Mr. Ernstone can't see him after all!"

And Mabel explained to her mother that they had recognised in the author of " Illusion " the unknown rescuer of Dolly's dog.

" You mustn't risk such a valuable life as yours is now any more," said Mrs. Langton, after purring out thanks which were hazily expressed, owing to an imperfect recollection of the circumstances. " You must be more selfish after this, for other people's sakes."

" I'm afraid such consideration would not be quite understood," said Mark laughing.

" Oh, you must expect to be misunderstood, else there would be no merit in it, would there ? " said Mrs. Langton, not too lucidly. " Dolly, my pet, there's something scratching outside the door. Run and see what it is."

Mark rose and opened the door, and presently a ridiculous little draggled object, as black as a cinder, its long hair caked and clotted with dried mud, shuffled into the room with the evident intention of sneaking into a warm corner without attracting public notice—an intention promptly foiled by the indignant Dolly.

" O-oh ! " she cried; " it's Frisk. Look at him, everybody—*do* look at him."

The unhappy animal backed into the corner by the door with his eyes on Dolly's, and made a conscious-stricken attempt to sit up and wave one paw in deprecation, doubtless prepared with a plausible explanation of his singular appearance, which much resembled that of " Mr. Dolis " returning to Jenny Wren after a long course of " three-penn'orths."

" Aren't you ashamed of yourself ?" demanded Dolly. (" Don't laugh, Mr. Ernstone, *please*—it encourages him so.) Oh, I believe you're the very worst dog in Notting Hill."

The possessor of that bad eminence sat and shivered, as if engaged in a rough calculation of his chances of a whipping; but Dolly governed him on these occasions chiefly by the moral sanction—an immunity he owed to his condition.

" And this," said Dolly, scathingly, " this is the dog you saved from the train, Mr. Ernstone ! There's gratitude ! The next time he shall be left to be killed—he's not worth saving ! "

Either the announcement or the suspense, according

as one's estimate of his intellectual powers may vary, made the culprit snuffle dolefully, and after Dolly had made a few further uncomplimentary observations on the general vileness of his conduct and the extreme uncleanliness of his person, which he heard abjectly, he was dismissed with his tail well under him, probably to meditate that if he did not wish to rejoin his race altogether, he really would have to pull up.

Soon after this sounds were heard in the hall, as of a hat being pitched into a corner, and a bag with some heavy objects in it slammed on a table, to a whistling accompaniment.

"That's Colin," said Dolly, confidentially. "Mother says he ought to be getting more repose of manner, but he hasn't begun yet."

And soon after Colin himself made his appearance. "Hullo, Mabel! Hullo, mother! Yes, I've washed my hands and I've brushed my hair. It's *all* right, really. Well Dolly. What, Mr. Ashburn here!" he broke off, staring a little as he went up to shake hands with Mark.

"I ought to have explained, perhaps," said Mark. "Ernstone is only the name I write under. And I had the pleasure of having your son in my form at St. Peter's for some time. Hadn't I, Colin?"

"Yes, sir," said Colin, shyly, still rather overcome by so unexpected an apparition, and thinking this would be something to tell "the fellows" next day.

Mabel laughed merrily. "Mr. Ashburn, I wonder how many more people you will turn out to be!" she said. "If you knew how afraid I was of you when I used to help Colin with his Latin exercises, and how angry when you found me out in any mistakes! I pictured you as a very awful personage indeed."

"So I am," said Mark, "officially. I'm sure your brother will agree to that."

"I don't think he will," said Mabel. "He was so sorry when they moved him out of your form, that you can't have been so very bad."

"I liked being in the Middle Third, sir," said Colin, regaining confidence. "It was much better fun than old —I mean Mr. Blatherwick's is. I wish I was back again—for *some* things," he qualified conscientiously.

When the time came to take his leave, Mrs. Langton

asked for his address, with a view to an invitation at no distant time. A young man, already a sort of celebrity, and quite presentable on other accounts, would be useful at dances, while he might serve to leaven some of her husband's slightly heavy professional dinners.

Mabel gave him her hand at parting with an air of entire friendliness and good understanding which she did not usually display on so short a probation. But she liked this Mr. Ashburn already, who on the last time she had met him had figured as a kind of hero, who was the "swell" master for whom, without having seen him, she had caught something of Colin's boyish admiration, and who, lastly, had stirred and roused her imagination through the work of his own.

As for Mark, he left the house thoroughly and helplessly in love. As he walked back to his rooms he found a dreamy pleasure in recalling the different stages of the interview. Mabel's slender figure as she stood opposite him by the mantelpiece, her reserve at first, and the manner in which it had thawed to a frank and gracious interest; the suspicion of a critical but not unkindly mockery in her eye and tone at times—it all came back to him with a vividness that rendered him deaf and blind to his actual surroundings. He saw again the group in the dim, violet-scented drawing-room, the handsome languid woman murmuring her pleasant commonplaces, and the pretty child lecturing the prodigal dog, and still felt the warm light touch of Mabel's hand as it had lain in his for an instant at parting.

This time, too, the parting was not without hope; he might look forward to seeing her again after this. A summer of golden dreams and fancies had indeed begun for him from that day, and as he thought again that he owed these high privileges to "Illusion," events seemed more than ever to be justifying an act which was fast becoming as remote and unreproachful as acts will, when the dread of discovery—that great awakener of conscience—is sleeping too.

CHAPTER XIII

HAROLD CAFFYN MAKES A DISCOVERY

HAROLD CAFFYN had not found much improvement in his professional prospects since we first made his acquaintance: his disenchantment was, in fact, becoming complete. He